

Review Article

Success Factors behind Women-led Enterprises: A Case Study of ‘Hela Bojun Hala’ Food Outlet

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Abstract - As a major women entrepreneurial initiation, the government of Sri Lanka has introduced women-led authentic local food outlets named 'Hela Bojun Hala' administrated by the Ministry of Agriculture. However, an alarming rate of failed women entrepreneurs in developing countries calls for redesigning a successful venture creation model. Hence, this paper intends to identify the factors that contributed to the success of women entrepreneurs at the 'Hela Bojun Hala' food outlet. This qualitative research uses a case study approach. Convenient sampling is used to select twenty women entrepreneurs in the selected outlet. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. The study found a set of push factors that thrived women entrepreneurs to be successful: utilization of inherent cooking skills of women, the need for economic empowerment, enhancement of skills through training and development, being innovative, and exercise of risk-taking.

Keywords - Women Entrepreneurs, Women-led Enterprise, Success Factors, Food Outlet.

I. INTRODUCTION

As a major women entrepreneurial initiation, the government of Sri Lanka has introduced women-led authentic local food outlets named 'Hela Bojun Hala' administrated by the Ministry of Agriculture. This project addresses twin gaps prevailing in the Sri Lankan context. The first gap is unemployment among women. The country has experienced comparatively high women unemployment over decades and, more specifically, in the rural sector (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018). Therefore, providing opportunities for rural women to be economically active is a timely need. The second gap is that poor dietary habits in Sri Lankan society increase the risk of diet-related non-communicable diseases (Perera et al., 2017). This emphasizes the consumption of nutritious local food instead of popular fast foods. Therefore, producing healthy local food for quick dine-in or takeaway is a promising entrepreneurial opportunity. Accordingly, 'Hela Bojun Hala' is the one-roof open kitchen that fosters women entrepreneurs while producing nutritional food choices for the community. It exploits the first-mover advantage in the local market.

This venture-based initiation is vital as it attempts to include economically inactive rural women. Although women constitute more than half of the population in Sri Lanka, unemployment among women is higher than the men (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2018). In the rural sector, the share of unemployed women accounts for 79%. Also, employed rural women were forced to engage in the unproductive agricultural sector for lower wages. Thus, economically empowering women hailing from rural farming communities is important for them to earn a decent income and alleviate their social status. Moreover, women's economic independence through an entrepreneurial approach facilitates society's overall development (Sharma & Varma, 2008).

However, alarmingly the successful women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka are comparatively less than their counterparts (Weerawansa et al., 2018). Many of them have failed in different stages due to a series of socio-economic and other factors. Further, the lack of women entrepreneurs impedes significant breakthroughs in rural and underdeveloped areas (Shah, 2013).

Therefore, examining a successful project that promotes women entrepreneurs would provide insights to redesign venture creation models to overcome the concurrent challenges in developing countries. Hence, this paper intends to identify and analyze factors that contributed to the success of women entrepreneurs at the 'Hela Bojun Hala' food outlet in Sri Lanka.

II. WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS AND THEIR SUCCESS FACTORS

For example, in South Asia, microfinance institutes largely cater to rural women who are starting a small business, while in Latin America and East Asia, traditional microfinance institutions generally focus on urban and near-urban entrepreneurs (Helms, 2006). Defining entrepreneurial success is a controversial factor. Some scholars defined success in terms of financial performance, such as growth, profit turnover, return on investment and the number of employees (Mohamad & Bakar, 2017; Jayasuriya & Azam, 2017; Dewi et al., 2019). Further, strong motivation, the greatest need for achievement and autonomy, creative tendency, calculated risk-taking, and



internal locus of control are identified as entrepreneurs' key characteristics (Widjaja & Mardanugraha, 2019).

However, beyond identifying the merely financial aspect, scholars expanded the definition of successful women entrepreneurship by including non-financial factors such as autonomy, job satisfaction, and capability to balance work-life (Mohamad & Bakar, 2017; Rani & Hashim, 2017). Women achieve entrepreneurial success by setting up new enterprises, expanding and improving existing enterprises' performance, and improving their families (Jalila et al., 2014).

It was revealed that microfinance institutes are interested in considering women as their primary customers. Morduch (1999) argues that one of the critical reasons for the success of microfinance programs across many countries is due to targeting of women, that is because women are generally associated with enhanced repayment, lower portfolio risk, fewer write-offs, and fewer provisions (DEspallier et al. 2011).

In a study of women-led enterprises, Gupta (2013) emphasizes that the enhancement of women entrepreneurs' skills, including managerial skills and technical skills, will empower women to overcome gendered barriers. Similarly, Ntiamoah et al. (2016) identify education as a vital factor that positively impacts the growth of enterprises. Yusuf (1995) suggests that the critical factors contributing to business success comprise appropriate managerial skills, access to finance, the personal qualities of an entrepreneur, and adequate government support. In the broader sense, the critical success of small and medium scale enterprises is determined by the characteristics of the business environment, characteristics of the entrepreneur, and characteristics of the Enterprise (Simpson et al., 2012). Also, Ranasinghe (2008) stated that success factors among women entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka were entrepreneurial competencies, formal and informal learning, external support, culture, early childhood experience, psychological characters. Further, a study in UNESCAP (2018) specifically mentioned that, demonstrating general ASEAN trends, women entrepreneurs in Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and the Philippines are particularly engaged in the retail, food, and hospitality sectors. Moreover, entrepreneurs' education, knowledge, experience, and skills increase their capability to perform entrepreneurial tasks, exploit potential opportunities, and acquire other resources for ventures (Kungwansupaphan & Leihaothabam, 2016). Brush et al. (2001) identified it as the human capital, the core factor that influences the entrepreneurial process.

III. ORIGIN OF 'HELA BOJUN HALA' FOOD OUTLET

The urbanization-led busiest lifestyles of Sri Lankans have changed their food preferences and eating habits. It altered food production and enforced more demand for fast food businesses in recent decades (Weerahewa et al., 2018). Despite the convenience, fast food consumption risks the well-being of the people. In the midst of lucrative

fast-food businesses in Sri Lanka, the launch of 'Hela Bojun Hala' remodelled the food habits by serving nutritious yet, traditional goodness. The 'Hela Bojun Hala' is introduced by Dr Rohan Wijekoon, the former Director-General of the Agriculture Department in Peradeniya. The first outlet opened in Gannoruwa (Kandy) in the last decade. The first outlet's success promotes the creation of a network of 'Hela Bojun' outlets throughout the country. Nearly 750 trained women entrepreneurs to manage these outlets (Rathnasinghe et al., 2019). At present, there are 22 outlets primarily operating in urban areas.

Currently, 'Hela Bojun' outlets are established to align with the United Nations project on Biodiversity for Food and Nutrition (BFN) and executed by the Department of Agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture initiated the program, and now the provincial agriculture departments have undertaken the responsibility. Multiple outcomes are expected through the establishment of 'Hela Bojun' outlets. The priority is to develop women entrepreneurs, improve rural women's economic and social status, and change dietary patterns towards healthy food (Ministry of Agriculture, 2018).

It operates under the tagline of 'True Sri Lankan Taste.' The meaning of 'Hela Bojun Hala' is the Traditional Food Court. It commercializes the Sri Lankan local food at subsidized prices. Cleanliness, native food in a fusion style, real-time preparation, and reasonable price are these outlets' unique practices. 'Hela Bojun' food court is an open kitchen that serves authentic Sri Lankan food at a subsidized price. These outlets offer the experience of tasting the instantly prepared local food and beverages. The ingredients of this food and drink are mainly grains and tuberous roots.

IV. WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS AT HELA BOJUN HALA IN BADULLA

The case considered in the study, 'Hela Bojun Hala' food court in Badulla, is administrated by the Uva Provincial Department of Agriculture. It undertakes the responsibilities of construction and landscaping of the outlets, provides the necessary equipment, executes the selection of potential women entrepreneurs, conducts training and awareness programs, and oversees existing outlets. Initially, the Provincial Agriculture Department called for applications in 2015 from the members of Women Framers Organizations in the province. Interested women are required to process an application. Further, the selection process is a unique and rigorous procedure, where rural women are needed to showcase their innovative food recipes and capacity to sustain the ability to provide quality and healthy food. The concern is given to using local grains to produce chemical and poison-free food items.

At the second stage of filtration, they had to participate in an interview to present a food item sample. These potential applicants have to showcase their capability of becoming entrepreneurs. The officials

evaluate the capacity and need for women to be an entrepreneur. The criteria taken into consideration in screening include existing knowledge about processing food, the necessity of financial assistance, hygiene, and the food sample's nutritional value. The priority has been given to women hailing from the low-income category. Specifically, poor women, widows, and women headed families in the rural sector were prioritized because of their grave need for securing earnings for their families.

Subsequently, the selected women participated in a series of training and awareness programs jointly conducted by the Provincial Agriculture Department and Extension and Training Centre, Peradeniya. Successful completion of the evaluation process during the training program, the women could start their business in the outlet. Each woman could sell one main food item and supplementary items. The Provincial Agriculture Department sets the guidelines for the production of each food item and quality standards. The women entrepreneurs are liable to adhere to the policies and preserve quality.

The government sponsors the construction of the outlet. However, maintenance relies on the hands of women entrepreneurs. The outlet's operation starts at 7.00 a.m., and the first group of women entrepreneurs sells their production until 1.00 a.m. The second shift will commence at 1.00 a.m., and it will continue for another 06 hours. Therefore, forty women formed into two groups and engaged in business on a shift basis. The morning and evening shifts will change between two groups every other week.

Each group is headed by a voluntary women leader recognized by the teammates. They employ two assistants to clean the tables, dishes, and premises. The women entrepreneurs collectively bear the wage for these assistants. Most of the servings are offered in either reusable plates and cups or leafy plates. They adhere to eco-friendly practices.

V. METHODOLOGY

This is qualitative research using a case study approach inquiring about the success factors behind the women-led entrepreneurs. It covers the sample of twenty women entrepreneurs who manage a 'Hela Bojun Hala' outlet in Badulla town, located in the Uva Province, Sri Lanka. Although 'Hela Bojun' outlets are operating in other towns, there are specific reasons to focus on Badulla's outlet. The Labor Force Survey in Sri Lanka (2017) revealed that the majority in the Badulla district (54.5%) engage in the agriculture sector. Furthermore, a study of gendered dimensions of well-being in the Badulla district found that men always expected them to be full-time homemakers even though they were educated (Kariyawasam, 2012). Therefore, the operation of 'Hela Bojun Hala' in Badulla opened up opportunities for economically inactive women.

A convenient sample of fifteen women entrepreneurs doing business in the Badulla outlet was taken, and interviews were conducted through a semi-structured interview guide. Since the interviews were conducted at the outlet premises. Further, the project details were collected from the National and Provincial Ministries of Agriculture. Observation technique to gather additional data and cross-check the data validity of interview data. Thematic analysis is used to analyze the data.

VI. SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

The interviews were conducted with fifteen women entrepreneurs representing one team of the selected outlet. The ages of these women entrepreneurs varied from the thirties to mid-fifties. Except for two interviewees, other women entrepreneurs in the sample do not have any prior business experience. All participants are married and have children. Around one-third of women are single mothers and the sole bread-winner of their families. Another five women are the only income earner of their family. On average, all of these women have to meet the requirements of four dependents.

Table 1. List of Women Entrepreneurs Interviewed

No.	Age Range	Prior Business Experience	Family Status		Economic Status of the Family
			Marital Status	No. of Dependents	
ENT 01	41-45	No	Married	3	Spouse is employed in the informal sector.
ENT 02	30-35	No	Married	4	
ENT 03	36-40	No	Married	5	
ENT 04	36-40	No	Married	3	
ENT 05	51-55	No	Married	5	Spouse is employed in the formal sector.
ENT 06	36-40	Yes	Married	6	
ENT 07	36-40	No	Married	4	The spouse is unemployed.
ENT 08	36-40	No	Married	4	
ENT 09	51-55	No	Married	4	
ENT 10	30-35	Yes	Married	4	

ENT 11	46-50	No	Married	5	The bread-winner.
ENT 12	46-50	No	Separated	3	
ENT 13	51-55	No	Widow	4	
ENT 14	51-55	No	Widow	3	
ENT 15	41-45	No	Widow	3	

VII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This project nurtures specific push factors that empower women entrepreneurs and make it an exclusively successful initiation in the recent decade. Those are the utilization of women's inherent capacity, prioritizing the need for economic empowerment, enhancing skills through training and development, modernized authentic recipes, and contractual (temporary) periods of serving (doing business).

A. MarketSpace for Inherent Cooking Skills of Women

Remaining roots of patriarchal culture in the Sri Lankan society challenge rural women to enter and sustain a promising livelihood (Herath, 2015). Thus active economic participation of women in the rural sector is minimal. The International Labour Organization (2016) reveals that the major reason for Sri Lankan women being economically inactive is to engage in routine housework. Hence, cooking is the borne responsibility of Sri Lankan women.

The years of experience in managing their household chaos, including food preparation, are the strengths of women. The 'Hela Bojun Hala' capitalizes on these capacities of women. It transforms their culinary skills as a major source of earning. The women who served in the household kitchen are now doing business in this open kitchen. Schwartz (2009) states that in this century's women are no longer a traditional resource confined to the gendered sphere of the household but innovative and knowledgeable labour.

Thus, the 'Hela Bojun' outlet empowered stereotype women by enabling commercialized cooking. It emphasized by an interviewee as,

"This opportunity is more beneficial for us to be self-employed. We lived as farming women, engaging in household activities and supporting our spouse. But, now we are into active business." (ENT 3)

Gunatilaka (2013) found that more than 70% of married women in Sri Lanka prioritize household management rather than persuading employment. Also, they are capable of handling multiple roles. Therefore, the turn-taking arrangement practised in this outlet supports the gendered roles of women entrepreneurs.

"We do our business for only six hours per day. It's a shift basis practice. This is more convenient for us to engage in food preparation for next day sales as well as look after our children and complete household activities." (ENT 6)

Further, women possess well-developed people skills (Greene et al., 2003). This networking capability of

women supports them to work as a team. The outlet is constructed as open compartments. Women entrepreneurs are required to prepare and sell food items in the given limited space in the compartment. It promotes mutual tolerance and shares scarce resources. They need to make collective decisions about maintaining the outlet, including frequent cleaning, electricity charges, water bills, and rent for the building. The literature confirms that women entrepreneurs create a collaborative work environment and are comfortable sharing information and resources, and prefer teamwork (McCellend et al., 2005). Thus, this outlet's establishment has professionally deployed rural women and facilitates to capitalize on existing skills.

B. Need for Economic Empowerment

At the screening of potential entrepreneurs, the officials of the provincial agriculture department have prioritized two concerns. Those are their existing culinary skills and their intensive need to earn for living. In other words, women of low-income farmers' families or widows were given priority in selection. An interviewee commented:

"As a single mother, I faced many challenges. Now, I could earn and confidently manage my family." (ENT 13)

About forty women directly benefited from this project and alleviated their social status as economically active labour. They can meet the needs of their children and other family members. Highlighting the benefits of this project, an interviewee stated:

"The daily earnings help me to fulfil my household needs. I have successfully resolved many of my household issues through my earning." (ENT 10)

Another entrepreneur expressed:

"Earlier, I didn't have a decent life. My family does not own a house to live in. Today, when I looked back, I built my own house. Also, some of my teammates bought vehicles on leasing for business purposes. So, our lives are quite improved." (ENT 15)

According to Jayawardane (2016), women entrepreneurs' uniqueness is they play a strong, empathetic, and supportive role in their family and society. Women entrepreneurs are empowered in economic security, family welfare, and social recognition (Mahapatra, 2018). Through the business, these rural women created indirect employment opportunities for others. One respondent revealed that she is employing two other women to prepare the ingredients. And the majority of women said that they were the sole breadwinners of their families. Through this business, they can save and invest in household requirements as well as business requirements. For

instance, one respondent said that she bought the necessary electric equipment to process food items.

C. Enhancement of Skills through Training and Development

The women entrepreneurs have been screened by the experts and given training covering the aspects such as food production, food safety, nutrition, preserving food quality, health and hygiene practices, entrepreneurial orientation, financial management, hospitality, customer care, and spiritual development. Mainly, the Women's Agriculture Extension Programme in the Department of Agriculture trained them in food preparation, food hygiene, customer care, and business management. Also, practical exposure is given through the site visit to the Gannoruwa outlet.

"Initially, we received training to prepare quality food items. They trained us to manage our routine business. We learned to handle our customers. Even now, the officials frequently visit us and provide us guidance and ensure the quality of food items."

(ENT 8)

Special training or developed skills could allow women entrepreneurs to respond to dynamic market requirements (Kungwansupaphan & Leihaothabam, 2016). This training empowers women to manage resources, such as raw materials, electricity and water, space, and even their customers. They also need to work on the cost of production as the Provincial Agriculture Department sets the maximum retail price prices. The daily earning depends on the volume of sales in a day. Therefore, in the long run, women need to attract more customers to make a significant profit.

D. Innovativeness Among the Women Entrepreneurs

Innovating is the most fundamental mechanism of creating a sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic business environment (Kothari, 2017). Similarly, the survival of women entrepreneurs is completely determined by the authentic and innovative fresh food items served at the outlet. The speciality of 'Hela Bojun Hala' is, this outlet fits a wide variety of nutritious local food and beverages fortified by novelty. Also, those are predominately vegetarian food. The traditional recipes are reinvented and freshly served as instant and convenient food. Therefore, it attracts school children and working adults daily. An interviewee shared her experience:

"Jackfruit cutlet is one of the fast-moving items in this outlet. Also, our customers prefer to enjoy porridge and soups in the evening" (ENT 2)

This outlet produces and serves unique items like Nutri-roti, jackfruit cutlet, cowpea Wada, and maize pittu. This approach is the competitive edge for these women entrepreneurs to compete with the giant fast-food sellers.

E. Taking the risk of Doing Enterprise on a Contract Basis

Most empirical studies confirm that women are more risk-averse than men (Castillo & Freer, 2018). However,

the 'Hela Bojun' outlet is exposing trained women to take risks. It sets the maximum retail price for food items. The entrepreneurs have to manage their volume of sales to secure profit. It is explained by an interviewee as;

"Sometimes, it is much challenging. There are days we are not able to sell our food. Especially, rainy days we are out of sales. Also, frequent changes in ingredient prices hit our profit portion. But, we retain in the business without scarifying the quality of our products." (ENT 11)

This experience forces them to wisely manage their seasonal sales and profits. Further, the women entrepreneurs are being facilitated to learn and earn for two years in the outlet. Initially, the Provincial Agriculture Department agreed with women to allow selling in the outlet for six months. This contract would be extended for two years upon the performance of women entrepreneurs. This practice emphasizes that women are required to gain the capacity to start their own business within this contract period. In that perspective, 'Hela Bojun Hala' is a learning space for rural women to enhance their entrepreneurial competencies, gain business experience, identify potential market opportunities, and enter into a new venture.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As a successful and socially productive women-led enterprise, the 'Hela Bojun Hala' food outlet strengthens rural women and creates a sustainable business model for local food producers. Enhancement of skills, employ inherent capacities of women, innovativeness, and contractual arrangement are the unique success factors of this model. As a women empowerment strategy, this model sets a new trend in the country. It engages rural women productively, makes them self-sufficient, and promote entrepreneurial culture. Therefore, this venture creates market space for trained women entrepreneurs. Findings implied that creating opportunities for women entrepreneurs by the government or any other organization would encourage them to succeed in their business. The deliberate initiatives to develop sustainable partnerships help women entrepreneurs build social and business networks, benefit from skill and experience sharing and increase their bargaining power with suppliers and buyers alike. It addresses the women unemployment issue in the country while empowering women.

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